Destroying Excess Small Arms: United States Policy and Programs

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Overview

The principal source of small arms and light weapons (SA/LW) in many regions of conflict is not new production but recirculated surplus stocks. Cold War-era stockpiles in the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, often poorly managed and susceptible to theft or illegal transfer, have been a source of arms for regional criminal organizations and terrorist groups. Ex-Warsaw Pact militaries eager to upgrade to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) standards have dumped large numbers of infantry rifles, machine guns, and light weapons such as rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGS) on to the global market. Sales of surplus arms, often to undesirable end-users such as insurgent groups or warring governments under international embargo, have proven a ready source of revenue for cash-poor developing countries.

In Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America, small arms used in one regional conflict frequently turn up in another regional conflict. Arms collected in the aftermath of a peace settlement, if not quickly secured and expeditiously destroyed, will often be dispersed into the community, exacerbating instability and violent crime, or fuelling new conflicts. Arms used by the FMLN in El Salvador and the Contras and Sandinistas in Nicaragua during the 1980s have been recently traced to insurgents in Colombia. Sometimes, the migration of arms spans oceans and continents: U.S. origin M-16 rifles captured in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon have turned up decades later in Central America.

U.S. policy is to counter the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, whether of U.S. or foreign origin, and to ensure that U.S. transfers of small arms and light weapons are carried out with the utmost responsibility. While robust export controls and enforcement are critical elements in the effort to curb illicit trafficking in SA/LW, the simplest and most reliable way to prevent proliferation of illicit arms is through proper stockpile management and expeditious destruction of excess. Taking up this global problem, the Department of State, working with the Department of Defense, has dedicated funding and expertise to assisting countries in improving stockpile management practices and destroying excess SA/LW.

History – U.S. Efforts

Until recently, U.S. destruction of excess small arms had been largely an ad hoc effort. Recognizing that reducing collected stocks of arms in a post-conflict environment is critical to alleviating violence and improving stability, U.S. military forces, sometimes working with multinational partners, have frequently undertaken the destruction of arms seized or otherwise collected in military or peacekeeping operations. The U.S. destroyed tens of thousands of small arms and light weapons in Iraq and Kuwait during and after the Gulf War. In Haiti in 1994 and 1995, the 10th Mountain Division destroyed 18,621 small arms and light weapons. In Panama, coincident with Operation Just Cause in 1990-91, U.S. forces destroyed 77,553 small arms and

light weapons. SFOR in Bosnia and KFOR in Kosovo have destroyed thousands of weapons. In Liberia, between July and October 1999, the U.S. sent experts and contributed $300,000 through the U.N. Trust Fund on Liberia to destroy almost 19,000 small arms and light weapons and more than 3 million rounds of ammunition.

As U.S. engagement on global small arms efforts grew during the late 1990s, interest in concrete measures to mitigate their harmful effects turned to the issue of eliminating recirculating and surplus stocks in areas of concern. At an October 15, 1999 summit meeting, the United States and Norway agreed to create a Joint Working Group to assist at-risk countries in the destruction of excess SA/LW. Shortly thereafter, on November 18, 1999, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe endorsed a declaration of 10 regional states to destroy seized and surplus weapons. To support this commitment, the U.S. and Norway offered to send technical assessment teams to member countries to assist destruction efforts. In May 2000, U.S. and Norwegian experts visited Albania on the first assessment visit to be undertaken since the conception of their joint efforts.

The Pilot Project: Albania

Albania offers an excellent case study of the problems caused by excessive, poorly managed stocks of weapons in an unstable political environment. During the March 1997 political crisis caused by severe economic instability and the collapse of the government, over 500,000 small arms and light weapons and many tons of ammunition were looted from government arsenals around the country. The proliferation of stolen military small arms in Albania led to soaring violent crime and dramatic increases in arms smuggling into neighboring countries such as Macedonia and Yugoslavia. Some estimates indicate that over 50 percent of the stolen Albanian arms ultimately ended up in Kosovo; in any event, the sudden influx of arms to ethnic Albanian separatists helped to ignite armed conflict in that region — a conflict which led to direct U.S. and NATO intervention.

Beginning in May 1998, the Albania government bolstered efforts to collect weapons circulating in the civilian population, both through new legislation and increased law enforcement measures. This effort was assisted in 1999 by the initiation of a United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) "Weapons in Exchange for Development" program (originally targeted at the Albanian district of Gramsh, later extended to Elbasan and Dirba). Under the UNDP program, a limited number of collected weapons were destroyed, though the focus of the program remained on collection of illegal arms. Efforts to eliminate collected and surplus stocks of Albanian arms began in earnest on September 7, 2000, when then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Eric Newsom, joined by representatives of the Norwegian and German Embassies in Albania, signed a memorandum with Albania's Minister of Defense, Ilir Gjoni. According to the memorandum, 130,000-plus weapons collected from the civilian population since the 1997 crisis were to be expeditiously destroyed along with surplus military stocks. The Albania project was praised within the Stability Pact and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as an important security and confidence building measure for the Balkan region. Since then, over 100,000 SA/LW have been eliminated in Albania with U.S., German and Norwegian assistance.

Expanding Efforts

The Albania initiative stimulated interest in the Balkan region and internationally in the importance of reducing stockpiles of surplus arms. A U.S.-Norwegian team conducted a successful joint assessment visit to Macedonia and Bulgaria in October 2000. The commitment of the U.S. government also grew with the release of $2 million in first-time dedicated funds in the fiscal year 2001 foreign operations budget for global small arms destruction; in fiscal year 2002 $3 million was budgeted for SA/LW destruction. Regional and international organizations

addressing the SA/LW proliferation problem began to recognize the importance of SA/LW stockpile management and destruction of excess. The landmark U.N. Program of Action, adopted following the July 2001 U.N. SA/LW Conference and the OSCE Document on SA/LW adopted in November 2000 contain provisions urging effective stockpile management and destruction of excess arms. The United States and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) signed a joint declaration on SA/LW measures in December 2000 which includes commitments to destruction of excess and illicit arms. In April 2001, NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) expanded its anti-personnel landmine destruction trust fund to include small arms and light weapons, encouraging PfP countries to commit to destruction of surpluses and NATO member countries to financially support these efforts.

The U.S. continues to expand its small arms destruction program. Projects have recently been completed in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Lesotho. New projects are under discussion in the Balkans, Latin America, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. U.S. support for destruction of surplus and illicit small arms and light weapons is intended to promote regional security, peace and reconciliation in regions of conflict. The unchecked proliferation of these arms threatens civilians, peacekeepers, and law enforcement officials, and complicates the work of rebuilding war-torn societies and regions. Given that destruction is relatively inexpensive (costing generally between $1-5 per weapon destroyed) and can generally be accomplished using locally available infrastructure (a variety of cheap methods are viable) and personnel, the program offers large dividends in threat reduction for a modest initial investment.

Policy into Practice

The Small Arms/Light Weapons policy outlined above does not preclude government-to-government sales or EDA grants of military small arms to countries in regions of concern, but it is a factor the Department of State weighs heavily in making decisions on such transfers. Again, U.S. policy is to counter the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons arms, whether of U.S. or foreign origin, and to ensure that U.S. transfers of small arms and light weapons are carried out with the utmost responsibility. Generally speaking, the Department will support a transfer of U.S.-origin weapons only if it is clear that it will not result in a net increase of military small arms in excess of the country's legitimate military requirements. SAOs can assist by addressing questions relevant to these decisions in their requests and in follow-up communications with DSCA and State.

- Does the number being requested make sense in terms of the size of the force for which it is being proposed? Many statements on service manpower, both classified and open source, are outdated or wrong. The SAO can help the case by providing an up-to-date count on active duty forces. Knowing the size of reserves and paramilitary forces helps as well.

- As U.S. weapons replace the country's current inventory, how many weapons will become excess to military requirements? If the intent is to pass on current stocks to un-or under-equipped reserve or paramilitary forces, will this use absorb all of them?

- How else might the country choose to dispose of its excess inventory? Exports? If so, to whom does it plan to sell its excess inventory?

- If excess weapons are to be stored, how will they be stored and controlled and by whom?

- What is the track record of the armed forces or police in maintaining security of national stockpiles of small arms? Have there been thefts or other illicit transfers?

• If excess weapons are to be destroyed, what is the plan for their destruction? May U.S. representatives, normally the SAO, observe the destruction of those weapons even if they are not of U.S. origin?

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